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**The Mythologisation of Key Workers: Occupational Prestige
Gained, Sustained... and Lost?**

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In February 2020, Home Secretary, Patel, labelled any person earning under £25k per year 'Low Skilled' or 'Unskilled'. Only one month later, struggling with the COVID-19 crisis, that same government labelled them 'Key Workers', realising just how important they really are. These workers haven't just become key to society, they always have, and will continue to be. Key Workers. And long may that term live on.

The Mythologisation of Key Workers: Occupational Prestige Gained, Sustained... and Lost?

Abstract

Purpose:

Key workers are deemed 'essential' to keeping the country going while the rest of us have been resigned to the safety of our homes. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, key workers have become the exalted symbol of the pandemic – although, pre-pandemic many of these roles were considered 'low skilled' and were (and still are) low paid.

Study design/methodology/approach:

The analysis uses newspapers as data sources to discuss occupational prestige and situate it within previous theory.

Findings:

This social commentary discusses how occupational prestige evolves and devolves during times of social change, and how elevated status, dependent on one's service to the country in the spirit of a 'war-time' narrative, is just temporary and fleeting. Prestige is wrapped up in notions of class, income, and education, and during the pandemic, 'key workers' have become their own sub-group with an almost mythologised status and value, which we argue might take the focus away from genuine efforts to improve working conditions (e.g., access to PPE and pay rises etcetera).

Originality/value:

The article considers the current value of key workers and how elevated levels of prestige are transitory. The enduring nature of this new status is yet to be seen. More qualitative nuanced research is required around how occupational prestige changes, evolves, and devolves, and more quantitative research on why and how widespread some of the critical issues might be.

"Firms need to remember that, to the public, saying they are a "key worker" is saying they are important like a nurse" (Reuters, Mail Online, 1 April 2020).

The Thursday night 8pm clap for our key workers will probably be remembered as "the defining ritual of the corona era" (*The Guardian*, 23/04/2020). Once a week, we all emerged from our tightly closed doors and clapped, banging pots and pans in solidarity with our neighbours while the police flashed their lights in unity. All over the country, children painted pictures of rainbows, buildings were lit up with the National Health Service (NHS) blue, and thank you to key worker posters were displayed in the locked up windows of shut up stores (Wood and Skeggs, 2020). London road charging was suspended "to help" key workers move around the capital "easily" in their efforts (*The Guardian*, 20/03/2020). Despite being closed to the general public, key workers could still send their children to nursery and school if "at least one parent or carer [was] considered critical to the COVID-19 response" (*The Guardian*, 22/03/2020a). Yet, this very public recognition and exaltation sits at odds with how some of these occupations were perceived pre-COVID-19. Indeed, many "were dismissed as low skilled before the crisis" (*The Guardian*, 11/04/2020). How, and why, did some occupations suddenly gain occupational prestige during the COVID-19 crisis? In this social commentary, we discuss how the occupational prestige of key workers evolved (and devolved) during this ongoing pandemic.

What is Occupational Prestige?

Despite early scholarly interest in the concept of occupational prestige (e.g., Steinross and Kleinman, 1989; Hochschild, 1983; Krau and Ziv, 1990), it has been largely absent from the extant literature in the last two decades and remains a neglected area of research (Duemmler et al., 2020). Occupational prestige includes status, based on certain cultural values of 'goodness', but also income, perceived education, power, and overall quality of work (Goldthorpe and Hope, 1972; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Status brings with it social recognition (Zhou, 2005), and Weber (1978) explains it as 'symbolic social power' that comes from cultural judgements of esteem and value to society. Cultural beliefs about superiority, equality, and inferiority construct these symbolic hierarchies of

power (Goldthorpe and Hope, 2014), and ‘worthiness’ is developed (and spread) via repeated interactions until they become social norms (Freeland and Hoey, 2018).

Being at the top of a prestige hierarchy brings with it certain privileges such as respect and being treated with ‘deference’ (Magee and Galinsky, 2008). In contrast, occupations at the bottom are more stigmatised (Goldthorpe and Hope, 2014). Given that status can be affected by societal change (Kramer and Kramer, 2020), it is not in itself surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected occupational prestige. For instance, the 2007 financial crisis tainted investment banking and bankers devolved from their position of high status to being described as partaking in ‘disgraceful’ and ‘shoddy’ behaviour (Schoen, 2017). What is particularly interesting however, is how and why occupational prestige shifts during times of social change. Economic shocks can have a profound impact on the way society operates. Although there are many examples of these shocks, the negative impact on the economy is usually limited to a narrow field of jobs. Economic events are usually indicative of a particular feature, such as ‘short-term/singular event’, ‘unexpected’, ‘large scale’, or ‘exogenous (e.g., war/political upheaval)’ (Reed, 2020), and sometimes encompass more than one characteristic. The significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic however, is widespread, and comprises all four of these characteristics. This in turn, changes the status of some occupations and their prestige value; more specifically, what is perceived by society as “‘more important work’ versus ‘less important work’” (Kramer and Kramer, 2020, p.1).

The Media and Occupational Prestige

The media plays an important role in influencing society’s perceptions, and the way in which key workers and their work are presented affects the way that society thinks about occupational prestige. Since the beginning of the pandemic, key workers have featured endlessly in United Kingdom (UK) news coverage. News media (including radio, television, and print) can serve as a representation of working life, whilst simultaneously providing acknowledgment and responses to certain occupational roles. Rhodes and Parker (2008, p.632) argue that popular culture is ‘a resource in organisations’ and the ‘image’ of these jobs sometimes begin from a position of opposition. Grandy and Mavin

(2011) argue that this is also the case for occupations that are stigmatised in some way or perceived to be low status.

Occupational prestige is constructed over time by various historical, social, cultural, and political factors. Gioia *et al.*, (2000) opine that impressions of an occupation are transient and are based upon direct and indirect information supplied by the organisation. We argue that the media's portrayal of a particular occupation, and of the individuals performing the work, may influence establishment of occupational prestige and status. Gioia *et al.*, (2000) further argue that occupational reputations are relatively stable and are shared judgements held by external parties. The mass media plays an important role in the construction of knowledge about occupational roles. Hellgren *et al.*, (2002, p.123) acknowledge that the media can be both 'sense-maker' and 'sense-giver'; in the former the media 'takes part in' while in the latter it 'influences' public opinion. We contend that the media is a key cultural site where positive and negative constructions are consumed, produced, and (re)constructed. The media is said to have a privileged role in the development of public opinion (Fairclough, 1995) and is a powerful tool since they are not 'neutrally describing events but constructing a version of events' (Potter and Wetherell, 1984, p.114).

Elevation of Status

Occupational prestige plays an important role in a structurally organised society, such as the UK, where occupations serve as an indicator of hierarchical classification. Prestige refers to influence that is granted to workers for their knowledge, skills, and their advancements in the occupation. It seems that prestige is actually relatively fluid, and can change over time, both temporarily and permanently. Although there are 'set' classifications of high versus low ranking jobs (as per the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC2010), cultural events and economic shocks dictate attitudinal shifts. Rank attainment assumes hierarchical differences are based on skills and abilities that individuals contribute to society through their work (Anderson and Kilduff, 2009). Prestige therefore represents cultural perceptions of occupation and these symbolic dimensions change over time. These perceptual changes are often so slow, so minor, that society may not notice them for decades. During the COVID-19 pandemic however, we have seen an unusually sped-up cultural shift in perceptions of certain 'low-

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3 skilled' occupations. The term 'key worker' (and its synonyms 'essential worker', 'critical
4 worker' etc.) has become the emblem of the 'heroic' worker keeping the economy going.
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6 Scores of significantly well-paid (and often incorrectly synonymised 'highly-skilled')
7 occupations have been made redundant during the pandemic; Spencer (14/04/2020)
8 argues that it has shown that society can "get by without corporate lawyers, lobbyists and
9 telemarketers".
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15 The development of labels in how certain occupations are perceived has direct
16 correlations with stigma. When labelled differences link to undesirable characteristics
17 (income, average education, social class etc.), the worker experiences several forms of
18 discrimination: devaluation, rejection, and exclusion (Link and Phelan, 2001). Labelling
19 theory relies heavily on the relief that individuals internalise social perceptions of
20 occupations (see also Cooley's 'Looking glass self' 1902). Refuse collectors (colloquially
21 named 'bin men/women'), have arguably one of the most stigmatised occupations (James,
22 1991) and feature near the bottom of the SOC2010 list. Recognised as key workers during
23 the COVID-19 pandemic however, refuse collectors have temporarily enjoyed an elevation
24 of status and prestige not usually enjoyed in their line of work. As well as other 'low-skilled'
25 occupations such as supermarket shelf-stackers, cleaners, and postal workers, refuse
26 collectors have been included in various appreciation drives, such as the Leeds 'Big Thank
27 You' Campaign, being the feature of new 'Thank You Bin Men' window stickers on
28 Amazon, and most interestingly, the highest value *Top Trumps* card in an updated version
29 of the game. A brand new edition of *Top Trumps* has been recently released, featuring the
30 'unsung heroes' of the pandemic. Refuse collectors have been deemed the most valuable
31 occupational playing card, coming second only to 'partners of key workers'. In the pack,
32 *Top Trumps* explains: "All our key workers are heroes, but some jobs are often less praised.
33 We want to make sure key workers are given the praise they deserve" (Pickering, 2020).
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50 The hierarchy of occupational roles allows workers to rank themselves and others
51 in reference to social privileges that are afforded to them from occupational status and
52 prestige; not only in terms of 'perks', (in this event, worker discounts, skipping queues,
53 privileged shopping times etc.), but also how they are written about in the media. Such is
54 the importance of being perceived as a 'key worker' headteachers warned that some
55 parents were lying about their occupational status to ensure their children secured a place
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at otherwise closed schools. The term 'key worker' has become the overarching social marker during the pandemic of someone who is important, valued and highly regarded, no matter what their actual occupation is in terms of its 'usual' identifiers (e.g., social mobility, class, status and income). In social identity theory, individuals can categorise themselves in relation to other social markers and are dependent on the knowledge that they belong to a social category or group. Belonging to a new high-value sub-group, designated the 'key worker', has afforded some lower-status groups temporary privileges which have not been accessible before. Occupational identities develop through direct experiences within the workplace and develop a vocational habitus (Colley *et al.*, 2003). Referencing social identity theory helps us to explore the link between prestige and occupational identity because it is within these discussions that workers can develop a 'new and improved' identity based on their prestige level increasing.

Changing Attitudes

There is a notable theme of being 'at war' with several wartime metaphors narrated in the media. For example, key workers are portrayed as "maintaining the productive peace of entire communities" (*The Guardian*, 09/04/2020). They are presented as "brave frontline workers" (*Mail Online*, 05/04/2020), "frontline soldiers in a war against a remorseless killer" (*The Guardian*, 21/03/2020a) - or worse, as "fallen soldiers in [this] terrible war" (*The Guardian*, 23/04/2020). Indeed, the "number of key workers and members of their families who are testing positive for Covid-19 has overtaken the number of sick people testing positive in hospitals" (*The Guardian*, 05/05/2020) and "social care workers in England and Wales have been twice as likely to die with coronavirus as the general working-age population" (*The Guardian*, 26/05/2020a). Key worker deaths are also being presented as especially heinous because of their key worker status; for instance, when Belly Muijina, a railway ticket officer, sadly died of coronavirus after being spat on while on duty, the Prime Minister's official spokesperson (rightly) condemned the horrendous act and noted how, "It is despicable for a key worker to be attacked in this way while serving the travelling public" (*Mail Online*, 13/05/2020).

Yet, some key workers refuted this war imagery and argued: “I don’t work ‘on the frontline’ because there isn’t one; I’m not in the army and we aren’t engaged in military combat” (*The Guardian*, 21/05/2020). Others argued that “you shouldn’t have to risk your life or die trying to help others to be seen as a human being” and that “the sacrifices people are making should be recognised and remembered. But their humanity should not depend on how they help “us” (*The Guardian*, 11/04/2020). Indeed, when teachers, backed up by their union, tried to raise concerns, they faced a backlash such that “it has somehow become unpatriotic for teachers to question the speed and safety of the return to class” (*The Guardian*, 15/05/2020).

Arguably, it has not always been a positive public reaction. There have been reports of care workers being verbally abused as ‘spreaders of death’ (BBC, 1/04/2020), and Abby Jones, a care worker in South Wales, was harassed on the street and had water squirted on her for being a “disease spreader” (*Mail Online*, 18/04/2020). Others have been attacked for wearing their uniforms in the street. These incidents, fortunately, seem to be few and far between, and the media have denounced the attackers of these key workers as abhorrent. What is interesting about the reporting of these attacks is that the term ‘key worker’ is used to describe the victim in the headlines, in all probability, to deepen the public disgust for the event and therefore heightens, albeit temporarily, prestige for the job.

What is for certain is that COVID-19 has “changed public attitudes towards those considered unskilled” (*The Guardian*, 18/05/2020). Presently, “certain citizens” are classified as “key workers” if their work is “considered essential to maintaining the productive peace of entire communities” (*The Guardian*, 9/04/2020). The list is extensive and critics have argued that the term is “too loosely defined” (*The Guardian*, 22/03/2020b). Somewhat obviously, doctors, nurses, the police, and teachers are on the key worker list. Workers involved in food production, processing, distribution, sale and delivery, along with “administrative occupations essential to the effective delivery of the Covid-19 response” in local and national government are also on the list (*Mail Online*, 20/03/2020). Staff needed for “essential financial services provision”, such as bank workers, key telecommunications staff and postal services and delivery workers are also listed. It

seemingly covers hundreds of occupations, really, anyone who is “still needed at work to keep the country together” (*The Sun*, 24/04/2020).

Indeed, “Covid-19 has changed public attitudes towards those considered “unskilled [or low skilled]” (*The Guardian*, 18/05/2020). It was only a few months ago, in February 2020, that Home Secretary Priti Patel, in discussing post-Brexit immigration controls, introduced a points-based system (modelled on Australia) which detailed how ‘low-skilled’ workers earning under £25,000 a year would be refused entry unless the government identified a shortage in a particular sector. Lothian-McLean (2020) detailed several occupations which come under the COVID-19 key worker categories that fall far short of the minimum wage required to avoid this ‘low-skilled’ label; carers (average annual salary [AAS] £12,500), phlebotomists (AAS £20,015), construction workers (AAS £15,000), radiographers (£24,000 starting), occupational therapists (£24,414 starting), farm workers (AAS £14,000), physiotherapists (£22,886 starting), and paramedics (£24,214 starting). Not forgetting the thousands of ‘vital’ NHS workers (healthcare assistants, porters, administration staff etc.) that are on much lower wages than £25,000.

Class and Hierarchy of Prestige

It is difficult to talk about key workers without discussing notions of class. Indeed, the lockdown has highlighted the extreme divide between “middle-class professionals [who] are able to retreat to the relative safety of working from their homes” and the nation’s “most undervalued and underpaid workers” - what is very clear is that “no floor can be cleaned remotely: you have now become frontline soldiers in a war against a remorseless killer” (*The Guardian*, 21/03/2020a). Indeed, there are many “unsung heroes of the coronavirus pandemic” such as postal workers, farmers, refuse collectors, supermarket workers, cleaners, nursery nurses (*Mail Online*, 27/04/2020). As similarly noted in *The Guardian* (26/05/2020a): “The public has this sanitised image of what a key worker is... They think a key worker is a consultant in a suit, or a nurse in scrubs. They don’t consider us [supermarket workers] key workers – they just think we’re unskilled”. There has certainly been a noteworthy “dramatic shift in the public’s perception of care workers” (*The Guardian*, 26/05/2020b).

“What defines a “key worker”? We know some politicians mean the police, nurses, possibly teachers and, on a good day, maybe even social workers. However, few, if any, would include healthcare assistants, support workers, cleaners and the rest of the hidden staff who play a crucial role in the social care team and who really make the services tick.”

(*The Guardian*, 21/03/2020b)

Postal workers, for example, are deemed an “emergency service”, but in reality staff do not even “have the ability to clean [their] hands” (*The Guardian*, 25/03/2020). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic “has revealed how much we rely on [...] low-paid workers, yet how poorly they are treated” (*The Guardian*, 26/05/2020a).

Concluding Remarks

As academics we also have a social responsibility. First, given that the extant literature has been largely dormant in the last two decades (Duemmler *et al.*, 2020), we call for further research on occupational prestige. It is especially important and timely because the economy is constantly evolving and new occupations are emerging (e.g., track-and-trace workers). We need both, more qualitative nuanced research around how occupational prestige changes, evolves, and devolves, and more quantitative research on why and how widespread some of the critical issues might be. Second, we also call for further research on the role that the media (and social media) plays in framing public perceptions of occupational prestige, especially focussing on their responsibilities and influences over how occupations are perceived.

What seems to be critical to constructions of key workers’ occupational prestige is their ‘service’ to humanity, their country, their community, and to humanity in general (Grasmick, 1976). Indeed, how the public perceives key workers is important for occupational prestige (Roberg *et al.*, 2002). Research shows that occupations ranked higher in prestige tend to have workers reports better health outcomes (Fujishiro, Xu, & Gong, 2010), higher self-esteem (Faunce, 1989), and more social capital (Van Der Gaag & Snijders, 2005). However, international research has found that social and occupational mobility is short-range and uncommon amongst unskilled/low-skilled workers (Bilton *et al.*, 1981) workers become ‘locked in’ to a status level and social mobility is limited (Broom *et*

al., 1980, p. 112). We have seen an unusual and unprecedented shift of the occupational prestige of some lower status workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly all of these 'key worker' occupations have enjoyed both practical and symbolic benefits to their status but how enduring is this change? It will be hard to quantify how much prestige was gained for each job; externally through public perception and internally through self-esteem for example, but there seems to have already been a shift. In July 2020, four months post-pandemic, in which the last three weeks have seen a substantial lift in lockdown restrictions, critics have claimed that key workers still accessing privileges such as queue-jumping are acting 'entitled', and the Daily Mail headlined an article 'Should NHS staff still be able to jump the queue?'. Public responses were to 'suck it up' as 'things are back to normal now'. It seems, that certainly for some people, the exalted status of the 'key worker' has already lost its (seemingly temporary) elevated levels of prestige.

Yet, where does that leave our key workers in the post-COVID 19 world once they have fulfilled their duty? What happens to the carers now that we have stopped clapping every Thursday? What about the firefighters and police once the rainbows come off the windows as the shutters are raised? As summarised by an anonymous doctor in The Guardian (21/05/2020):

"What I don't find nice, and I really don't need, is people clapping. I don't need rainbows. I don't care if people clap until their hands bleed with rainbows tattooed on their faces. I don't even (whisper it) need Colonel Tom, lovely man as he clearly is".

Rather, what would be nice is to work in:

"an adequately funded NHS, staffed by people listened to by the government. It would be nice to see appropriate remuneration for the low-paid staff holding the service together, to see that the value of immigrants to the NHS is appreciated, and to have a health service integrated with a functioning social care service".

Despite all of above "various odds and sods of bonuses and special housing deals" that have been publicly handed out to "small groups of staff in the public eye" (*The Guardian*, 21/03/2020b), they are still "[deemed] unworthy of pay commensurate with their social importance" (*The Guardian*, 9/04/2020). It has been documented widely that among those applauding the NHS on a Thursday night, were senior government ministers,

including prime minister Boris Johnson and secretary of state Dominic Raab, and because of this, the public have been quick to share the story from 2017 when MPs were seen to cheer after winning a vote against a 'proper pay rise' for nurses. At the time, this seemed "insulting and disrespectful to many NHS workers" (*The Mirror*, 14/04/2020), and the story was cited and retweeted many times during the pandemic. In a perhaps unsurprising development, a pay rise has recently been announced recognising the "vital contribution" of public sector workers during the pandemic (BBC, 21/07/2020), although this does not include nurses, junior doctors, and care workers. In 2019, the former negotiated three and four-year deals respectively, although this was of course conciliated pre-pandemic. During the crisis, carers for example have worked in "demanding, emotionally draining and dangerous (due to PPE shortages) conditions" (Jacobs, 28/04/2020) and following the announcement, a carer expressed "I feel like the prime minister might have well as slapped us around the face and said "to be honest, you don't deserve it" (*The Metro*, 21/07/2020). Although the characteristics of occupational prestige are more nuanced and multi-layered than just wages, the pay of some frontline workers does not reflect the appreciation shown at 8pm on a Thursday. After all, "as laudable as the clap for carers campaign is, you cannot eat applause" (Jacobs, 28/07/2020).

If the pandemic is causing society to rethink the way the economy operates, it should encourage us to also think about occupational prestige and value. As shown by coronavirus key worker categories, high pay does not necessarily mean high value and vice versa. There have been calls to sustain and maintain the increased prestige and rise in occupational status for key workers, particularly those previously described as 'low/unskilled). Graphic Craig Oldham researched what jobs qualified as 'low-skilled' according to government standards and incorporated these professions into a poster campaign for Liverpool and Manchester (see Figure 1 below). Using the slogan 'May They Never Be Deemed "Low-Skilled" Again', the background of the poster is filled with these jobs. Oldham wanted to 'draw attention to the hypocrisy of the new policies... The same people we can't live without are also the ones being deemed unskilled' (Stewart, 2020). Oldham argues that these key workers 'haven't just become key to society, they always have been, and will continue to be, Key Workers' (Stewart, 2020).

In February 2020, Home Secretary, P. Patel, labelled any person earning under £25k per year 'Low Skilled' or 'Unskilled'. Only one month later, struggling with the COVID-19 crisis, that same government labelled them 'Key Workers', realising just how important they really are. These workers haven't just become key to society, they always have, and will continue to be, Key Workers. **And long may that term live on.**

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